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AUTHOR Cates, Dennis L.; Kinnison, Lloyd
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ABSTRACT

The education of students with severe to profound mental handicaps (SPH) or multiple disabilities may be greatly limited in rural settings. A survey investigating this issue in a southwestern state was completed by 136 of 346 directors of special education, 67 of whom worked in rural special education cooperatives. These cooperatives served 393 preschool, 851 elementary, and 828 secondary students with SPH or multiple disabilities. However, only 4 percent of teachers of these students possessed SPH certification, and only 26 percent possessed certification in mental retardation (MR). Figures were similar for individual rural districts and urban areas. The most common service delivery systems used by rural cooperatives were self-contained classrooms: (1) 32.5% of cooperatives for SPH elementary students; (2) 31% for MR elementary students; (3) 20% for SPH secondary students; and (4) 26% for MR secondary students. Developmentally-based program models were reported by 86 percent of rural cooperatives and ecologically-based programs by 29 percent. The fact that few districts used transdisciplinary teaming may indicate a lack of understanding of this model rather than a conscious decision to use other models. Survey results suggest that the quality of services available for SPH and multiply disabled students is limited by lack of qualified teachers, little use of ecological procedures, and a tendency to ignore functional and near-future needs. (SV)

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Students with Severe to Profound Mental Handicaps and Multiple Disabilities in Rural Schools: Can their Needs be Met?

Dennis L. Cates

Department of Educational Psychology

College of Education

University of South Carolina

Columbia, SC 29208

Lloyd Kinnison

West Texas State University

RC 018489

Running head: Students with Severe to Profound Mental Handicaps and/or Multiple Disabilities

Abstract

The education of students with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities may be greatly limited in rural settings. A survey of rural special education cooperatives in a southwestern state revealed that many of these students are being served by teachers who are not certified in the areas of severe/profound handicaps or multiple disabilities. Further, few districts utilize teachers who are certified in mental retardation to teach SPH/MH classes. The survey also indicated a lack of emphasis on ecological or environmental goals in programming for students with severe to profound handicaps. The fact that few districts indicated use of transdisciplinary teaming may be indicative of a lack of understanding of this model rather than a conscious decision to use other models. Results suggest a need for a thorough examination of educational services provided for students with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities in rural areas.

Students with Severe to Profound Mental Handicaps and/or Multiple Disabilities in Rural Schools: Can Their Needs be Met?

Meeting the needs of students with severe to profound mental handicaps and multiple disabilities has, throughout recent history, been provided in isolated locations (Berres, M. & Knoblock, P., 1987) by programs housed in institutional or self-contained settings (Gaylord-Ross, R. 1989). Indeed, exceptional populations regarded as low-incidence have long been educated in residential facilities, special day schools, or, prior to the full implementation of (PL 94-142), not educated at all. The implementation of PL 94-142 has, however, resulted in changes few could have imagined prior to its passage. In addition to the alteration of administrative elements, perceptions of educators, and more gradually the general public, have been changed to reflect a view of educating students with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities as being within the realm of possibility for local school districts (Lilly, M., 1985). Although this perception is not all-pervasive, the presence of students with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities in public schools throughout the country suggests a need for a reevaluation of instructional planning (Fredericks, H. 1985).

Local school districts are experiencing an increase in

the enrollment of students with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities (Stainback, S. & Stainback, W., 1985). Many of these districts are unprepared for the sudden inclusion of these students into their programs. Thus, programs are often hurriedly constructed with little collaboration between special and regular education (Biklen, D., & Foster, S., 1985). This problem is compounded in rural settings in which small numbers of low-incidence populations are often referred to as justification for limitations on hiring (DaPaepe, J. & Walega, S., 1990). Provision of services for students with the most severe handicaps is often left to the one special education teacher serving the district, the resource teacher for students with mild handicapping conditions (Bacon, E., 1988). Such an arrangement places tremendous stress on the teacher responsible for these students due to lack of training, lack of assistance for meeting the intensive programming needs of these students, logistical issues related to implementation of ecological approaches, and lack of appropriate facilities and equipment for students with physical and health impairments. Like the overburdened infrastructure of inner city schools, rural schools are faced with a similar predicament when expected to serve a few students with multiple disabilities or severe to profound mental handicaps in often isolated conditions (DaPaepe, J. & Walega, S., 1990).

One answer to this dilemma is to train special education teachers to serve all handicapped children in a truly multicategorical or noncategorical model (Dempsey, S., 1990). Some states have moved in this direction, others have not (Berres, M. & Knoblock, P., 1987). Despite the fact that generic certification relates only to learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and mild behavior disorders in some states, many of the teachers holding this certificate find themselves serving students ranging from mild learning disabilities to the most profoundly handicapped student. Training programs in these states reveal little if any exposure to methods and procedures for serving low-incidence populations, to say nothing of the cursory treatment often found in introduction to special education courses. Resource teachers faced with modifying academic training for mildly handicapped students often do not have the answers for what to do with the more severely handicapped students. When they do seek answers and focus on logical approaches, they are often thwarted because of limited resources, logistical problems, and the sheer distance to needed environments for community based education.

The need for well trained teachers and well designed programs for educating students with severe to profound mental handicaps and multiple disabilities is one which is widespread across the country (Berres, M. & Knoblock, P.,

1987). However, the need is most critical in rural settings. The placement of this population in home school districts is a relatively new phenomenon which places a unique set of demands on rural special education programs. Those demands which are most difficult to meet are focused on the nature of assessment, program development, personnel requirements, and the ability to maintain delivery of services which reflect current and best practices (Berres, M. & Knoblock, P., 1987). The purpose of this study was to investigate the provision of educational services in rural areas of a southwestern state to students with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities. Information gathered focused on availability of certified personnel, assessment, placement, curriculum design, and educational approaches.

Method

The population identified for this study consisted of the directors of special education in rural special education cooperatives, individual rural school districts, and urban districts. A cover letter and enclosed survey were sent to all of these directors. Three hundred forty-six were mailed. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study and requested completion of an enclosed survey. The survey included questions designed to obtain the following information: (a) administrative arrangement; (b) student information; (c) teacher certification; (d) curricular

approaches; (e) assessment approaches; and (f) team models. Construction of the survey instrument followed guidelines provided by Kerlinger (1979, pp. 151-153). Participants were asked to provide a check mark beside the appropriate response or responses to eleven questions or statements. In addition to this, they were to indicate if their school district was part of a special education co-operative or, if it was not, to indicate the population of the primary municipality in which the school district was located. The survey was short (two pages) and was designed to require a short time to complete.

Results

One hundred thirty-six survey questionnaires were returned. This represents a return rate of 39% of the total defined population for this study. Forty-nine percent (67) of the returns came from rural special education cooperatives.

SPH/MH Served by Age Group

Of the 393 preschool students age six and below reported by all districts responding, 34.6% were located in rural special education cooperatives. The percentages for primary, intermediate, junior high, and senior high were 48.1, 37.2, 40.4, and 34.9 respectively. Total numbers reported were 393 for preschool, 469 for primary, 382 for intermediate, 346 for junior high, and 482 fir senior high. These totals represent rural and urban special education

departments.

Certification of SPH/MH teachers

Of the 67 rural cooperatives reporting, 4.3% indicated that individuals serving as teachers in classes for students with severe or profound mental handicaps or multiple disabilities possessed an SPH endorsement on their basic teacher certification. Only 26.4% indicated that teachers of these classes possessed an endorsement in the area of mental retardation. Figures from individual districts or urban areas were 6.6% and 25% respectively. Cooperatives reporting teachers of these classes holding generic special education certification represented 30% of those reporting. It should be noted that many teachers possess multiple certificates and endorsements. This results in total percentages which do not equal one hundred. Teachers possessing endorsement in learning disabilities were reported by 12.86% of the rural cooperatives and 9.9% of the other districts. Generic special education was the only certificate held by SPH teachers in 15.6% of the rural cooperatives. Endorsement in mental retardation was the only certificate reported by SPH teachers in 7.8% of the rural cooperatives. The total absence of SPH teachers having an SPH or MR endorsement was reported by 34.37% of the rural cooperatives and 35.087 of the other districts.

Delivery system

The majority of rural cooperatives place their students

with severe to profound mental handicaps and/or multiple disabilities in self contained classrooms. At the elementary level, 32.5% utilize self contained classrooms for SPH or MH (multihandicapped) students. Self contained classrooms for individuals with mental handicaps were indicated by 31% of the cooperatives. The figures for secondary were 19.5% and 26% respectively. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the type of service delivery system provided for SPH and/or MH students in all of the reporting districts.

Program model utilized

Overwhelmingly, the rural cooperatives indicated that their SPH programs were developmentally based (85.7%). Ecologically based programs were reported by 28.6% of the rural cooperatives. Interesting to note was the report by 14% of the cooperatives that their programs were based upon the state's academic essential elements. Because these figures total more than 100%, it is evident that programs reflect combinations of these models.

Skills assessment and curriculum planning

Table 2 provides a comparison of those cooperatives reporting emphasis on assessment procedures which were behavioral, developmental, or ecological. The percentages of cooperatives in each category providing assessment for the skill areas listed are provided. Future environmental

Table 1

SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM PROVIDED FOR STUDENTS WITH SEVERE AND PROFOUND HANDICAPS OR MULTIPLE DISABILITIES

	ELEMENTARY	SECONDARY
RESOURCE ROOM	15.0%	13.0%
HALF DAY RESOURCE ROOM	3.3	4.9
MAINSTREAMED CLASSES	14.2	9.7
SELF CONTAINED (SPH or MH)	32.5	19.5
SELF CONTAINED (MR)	31.0	26.0
EARLY CHILDHOOD	.8	0
VOCATIONAL HANDICAPPED CLASSES		6.5
VOCATIONAL ADJUSTMENT CLASS		10.6
REGULAR VOCATIONAL CLASSES		7.3
WORKSHOP		1.6

Table 2

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSESSMENT PROCESS
AND ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

SKILL AREA ASSESSED	BEHAVIORAL	DEVELOPMENTAL	ECOLOGICAL
SELF HELP SKILLS	100%	100%	100%
SOCIAL SKILLS	100	98	100
CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS	83	82	100
DOMESTIC NEEDS	76	73	92
LEISURE-RECREATIONAL NEEDS	80	75	96
FUTURE ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS	65	59	88
VOCATIONAL SKILLS	87	80	100
FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS	85	75	84

needs were part of the assessment procedures of 65% of the behaviorally oriented, 59% of the developmentally oriented, and 88% of the ecologically oriented cooperatives. Domestic needs were assessed by 76% of the behaviorally oriented, 73% of the developmentally oriented, and 92% of the ecologically oriented cooperatives. Current environmental needs were evaluated by 100% of the environmentally oriented cooperatives compared to 83% and 82% of the behavioral and developmental cooperatives respectively.

Team Approach

Of the three types of assessment teams, only 1.6% of the special education cooperatives indicated that a transdisciplinary approach was used. Interdisciplinary teams were utilized in 9.8% of the cooperatives. Eighty-eight and one half percent of the cooperatives reported using multidisciplinary teams. In urban and individual districts, the percentages were 12.1% interdisciplinary, 5.2% transdisciplinary, and 82.7% multidisciplinary.

Discussion

Analysis of this data suggests that SPH/MH students are fairly evenly distributed across age groups. One would expect a larger percentage of SPH/MH students in more urban districts because of larger populations. However, the relatively large percentages for the rural cooperatives is indicative of the trend toward placing these students in their home districts. The fact that relatively large

numbers of SPH/MH students are found in the rural cooperatives surveyed, and 34.37% of these cooperatives have no teachers with endorsements in SPH or mental retardation, suggests a tremendous need for increased efforts to provide training in teacher preparation programs.

The certification reported most often was generic special education (30%). It is interesting to note that 15.6% of the cooperatives employed SPH/MH teachers who only had generic special education certificates. Only 4.3% of the special education cooperatives reported employing teachers with SPH endorsements. Despite the fact that large numbers of SPH teachers have generic certificates, their training may lack components focusing on the education of SPH and MH students. Most generic programs emphasize mildly handicapped students. Teachers in rural cooperatives who lack training in the areas of SPH/MH may face situations in which resources are limited or nonexistent and support services are difficult to access.

The wide range of certificates noted (generic, MR, SPH, ED, LD, Speech-Language Pathology, Deaf Ed., Deficient Vision, Early Childhood, and Bilingual Education) suggest that teachers hired to teach SPH/MH students in rural areas may not be interested in continuing very long with SPH/MH students. The low percentage of districts indicating that teachers holding SPH or MR endorsements teach SPH/MH students suggests a training crisis. As more students with

severe and profound handicaps stay home and attend schools in their home districts, the need for trained personnel will increase. Training programs should be developed which prepare individuals for serving SPH students in rural areas. Because of the low incidence of this population, one cooperative may not have enough students to hire an SPH teacher. It may be time to prepare rural special education specialists who are certified or endorsed in a wide variety of areas. Such training would be truly cross-categorical and would provide training in mild, moderate and severe to profound disabilities.

It appears that those cooperatives which utilize ecological assessment procedures tended to be more future oriented than those emphasizing behavioral or developmental approaches. Despite the fact that future environmental needs, recreational needs and domestic needs are considered vital to the education and training of students with severe to profound disabilities, many districts continue to exclude these areas from their programs. The tendency to focus less on ecological approaches may be reflective of the lack of training represented by SPH/MH teachers in the field.

The survey findings suggest a need for a close examination of programs designed to educate severely to profoundly handicapped and multiply disabled students, particularly in rural areas. Quality of services is limited by lack of qualified teachers, little use of ecological

procedures, and a tendency to ignore functional and near future needs. If programs are to adequately serve these students, then training programs must address procedures for educating severely to profoundly handicapped and multiply disabled students. Teachers cannot be expected to learn what they need to know on the job. The complex nature of teaching severely to profoundly handicapped students warrants a training program which thoroughly addresses medical issues, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, transitional planning, and the combination of these factors with the issue of low cognitive functioning. Training in high incidence categorical programs will not prepare teachers to work with students who have a myriad of combinations of handicapping conditions. This is complicated by the placement of some of these students in rural areas where the special education teacher is expected to take on this responsibility. SPH/MH programs can no longer be based on a predictable progression to nowhere. Students with severe to profound disabilities should be afforded the opportunity to be a part of possibility searches. Although many teachers who lack training may be possibility searchers, the addition of a background in SPH/MH would enable them to turn the possibilities into realities.

The results of this survey suggest that rural special education training programs are needed. These programs

should reflect the realities faced by special education directors who cannot find enough certified persons willing to work in rural settings, or who do not have enough students to warrant a full time teacher of the severely to profoundly handicapped or multiply disabled. If teacher training programs do not adequately address low-incidence areas, then parents will continue to have to send their children away or to accept second best. The time has come to recognize the shortage in rural areas and address the problem by establishing truly generic programs. If it is impossible to separate students into cadres of rural or urban teachers, then all teachers should be prepared to take on the responsibility of serving a wide variety of exceptional children. Many rural districts do not have the luxury of providing categorical placements for their exceptional students. Teachers trained to work with all students could help meet this need. If basic certification cannot be changed, then, special education teachers in rural areas should be required to acquire additional training.

The least restrictive environment ought to be that placement which places the least amount of space between a child and his or her parents. However, in attempting to place students in such an environment, school administrations often create more restrictive environments by hiring teachers who lack training and who do not utilize approaches which will aid in transition. Further research

is definitely needed. We must ascertain the extent to which children with severe to profound handicaps and/or multiple disabilities are being subjected to educational programming which perpetuates their limitations and precludes their ability to take their place in society as a productive member.

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